GOD HAS MANY NAMES:

VI. EMMANUEL

December 23, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 1:1-18

"'...the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" -Matthew 1:23 (NRSV)

Back at the beginning, on the edge of history, a voice spoke from a burning bush, and when the man who heard the voice asked the name of the one speaking, what he heard was not a name but a verb...

"I am who I am..."

"I will be who I will be..."

There is a sense in which all of religion is about that: about the name of God.

And there is a sense in which the uniqueness of our religion is precisely that God doesn't have a name. God is a presence, a power, a Thou with whom we ultimately have to do. Our God will not be limited by a single name. Our God will not be contained by an idol, a ritual, a creed.

Our God is the one who comes to be with us in our lives - in this world, in our relationships, our fears, our hopes, our most precious dreams.

All religion is about that, even the story of a child's birth in Bethlehem of Judea long ago...

The temptation has always been to remove the precious story from the world, to protect it from becoming soiled, corrupted and demeaned.

And, frankly, there is a lot about the holiday festivities from which we wish to protect the nativity. To be the church here, on Michigan Avenue, is to know that more clearly than anyone else. We were upstaged this year by a good six weeks. We put our wreaths and modest lights up last, long after the Avenue was ablaze with Christmas decorations.

Because the economy did not seem very encouraging, the first holiday wreaths, candles and bells appeared in stores across the street before Halloween this year. And in spite of smaller crowds this year, a December Saturday on Michigan Avenue is an exhilarating and demanding experience aesthetically and physically. The sidewalks are full of people on an important mission. The Salvation Army brass quartet plays carols, Santas on each corner ring bells and solicit donations. The lone saxophonist plays counterpoint - "Winter Wonderland," over and over again. Jews for Jesus hand out leaflets, and so do other people advertising restaurants, bus tours and new brands of pizza. Two men ask if you can spare any change for the homeless; youngsters sell M & M's for their basketball team; across the street the anti-fur coalition is chanting; and a suburban high school chorus is having at the Hallelujah Chorus. And four police officers, two on horseback, more or less preside. I can't imagine a scene more distant from the picture of the nativity - the silent, holy night in Bethlehem's little town, the dark stillness of the shepherd's fields. There were two new features this year. Salvation Army officers occasionally used a "boom box" to play "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and just when things appear to be settling down at the end of the day, a drummer sets up his equipment across the street and begins to pound away as if he's playing in the Count Basie Band in concert. He wears a Santa outfit and he plays for hours, sometimes joined by two friends, playing large bongo drums.

The temptation is, and always has been, to protect "our" Christmas from that: to preserve its purity and simplicity from the banalities of Santa playing bongos and eight foot tall snowmen over at Water Tower Place.

That is the point of The Best Christmas Pageant Ever (Barbara Robinson), a story which has become something of a seasonal favorite.

It's about a Sunday School pageant in a small church and it features the "horrible Herdmans," the "absolutely worst kids in the history of the world."

The narrator's mother is the director of the pageant and she must contend with the Herdmans, who this year are determined to participate. Imogene Herdman, in fact, will play the part of Mary. And in the person of these not altogether implausible youngsters, the very serious issue of the relationship of the nativity to the world, and deeper still, the relationship of God to the world and the location of the faithful life, is played out.

At the dress rehearsal, Imogene Herdman, playing Mary to the hilt, is snapping at the Wise Men: "Don't touch him!" An argument erupts about the baby's name:

> "Why didn't they let Mary name her own baby?" Imogene demanded. "What did the angel do, just walk up and say, 'name him Jesus?'"
>
> "'Yes,' mother said, because she was in a hurry to get finished."

But Alice Wendleken had to open her big mouth.

"I know what the angel said," Alice piped up. "She said," 'His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.'"

"I could have hit her."

"My God," Imogene said, "He'd never get out of the first grade if he had to write all that." [p. 64-65]

The temptation, of course, is to protect the lovely story of Jesus' birth from the ambiguous humanness, the tacky, earthy vulgarity of Imogene Herdman. And often the effort is undertaken with great determination. "Put Christ back into Christmas" usually means take the nativity out of the world and hide it in church. And my concern with that this morning is that it points to that larger dynamic.

The temptation is to spiritualize the Christian Gospel, to confine the teachings of Jesus to the dimensions of the spirit, to isolate what could be radical behavioral and political and economic proposals from real life and to construct a comfortable, sentimental and irrelevant religion. In terms of the subject we have been pursuing, the names of God, that effort is often rooted in a basic theology which removes God from life; contrary to the witness of our own Bible, to postulate a transcendent deity sitting on a throne up in the sky, even though the record is that people keep encountering God in the most human and worldly of places and situations; in their captivity, isolation, grieving, and in their ecstasy and joy. The old temptation is to take this baby who became a man, who lived and loved and died a man, and make him into some plaster or plastic icon. The temptation is to take his story out of history and make it over into a sacred legend, which will forever remain lovely, spotless, inspiring and insipid.

That temptation - that very real dynamic - is at least two thousand years old. And it began in earnest in the first generation after the birth and life and death of Jesus.

The first task of the early church was to come to some conclusions about who Jesus was...

There's a sense in which the nativity stories are the answer to that: Matthew with his story about the Magi recognizing a royal star; Luke with a multitude of angels appearing to shepherds.

And there is a third effort: The Gospel according to John. This writer begins at the beginning. Before the beginning, actually. At that time before there was time; at the time before the Big Bang, or the Great Light... before there was anything, he says, there was the Word.

And in what appears to be a deliberate reflection of that mysterious incident, back at the beginning of the story, when God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush and says, "I am who I am," the writer says:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the word became flesh and lived among us."

It occurred to me in the middle of last week that I've been working on that passage for thirty years at Christmas time and it is as full of beauty and mystery as ever. And it occurred to me that the early church pondered this passage for 300 years: that arguments raged for years and decades and centuries over what exactly this author means when he looks at a manger in Bethlehem and says:

> "In the beginning was the Word, and
> the Word was made flesh and dwelt
> among us";

That the argument came to a kind of climax at a council of church leaders in the year 325 in the city of Nicaea when they produced a formula - a creed - which said that Jesus was "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God," ...not that it clears up the mystery much.

What that writer named John was saying was that it is the nature of God, whose only name is "I am who I am," that God's nature is to be in relationship: that God is not the unmoved mover of philosophy - the serene and solitary deity of the Greeks. No, the nature of God is to be in relationship: God has something to say. And that in order to say it, God creates. That is, in order to have someone to whom to say the Word, someone with whom to have a relationship - a conversation - God creates the world. That is what these soaring, mystical phrases mean:

> "The Word was in the beginning with God -
> all things came into being through him."

So God says the Word and the Word God says is the creation, the universe, the planets, the earth, the creatures, the people. And that is quite an assertion!

The creation itself is a Word from God.

At the time almost everybody, including the first Christians, were flirting with the idea that the world was a very intimidating, terrible place, full of suffering, injustice, cruelty and ultimately death... a place to be delivered from.

It was a positively scandalous suggestion - that you can know something about God not by inducing a mystical trance or meditating in your study, removing yourself from the world, but exactly the opposite, by looking at the physical, material world. But that wasn't the half of it. That same "Word" says the writer, that same divine necessity to be in communication, in relationship, became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word was made flesh! God's nature, God's creative, loving power took on human flesh - the flesh and blood of the humanity of a Galilean Jew - and lived among us. The old temptation is to isolate it, protect it from life, but here the thrust is not away from life but into it. Incarnation... God in the flesh...

Who or what is God? The Christian answer is, "look at Jesus, the Christ."

And so it means, first of all, that this humanity, this flesh, this mortality in which you and I live for seven or eight decades or so, this physicality which thrills us and scares us to death, this body is the same instrument through which God chose to speak a word. And so whatever else you ever say about it, this remains. This is the flesh the Word of God became.

Madeleine L'Engle who in addition to writing books, loves being a grandparent, rocks a grandchild and reflects:

> "There is no more beautiful witness to the word made flesh than a baby's naked body. I remember with sensory clarity sitting with one of my babies on my lap and running my hand over the incredibly pure smoothness of bare back and thinking that in touching the particular created matter, flesh of our own flesh, we are touching the Incarnation." [Circle of Quiet, p. 243]

The world - our world, our physical sensual, tactile world - is not evil. It is good. Our flesh is what God chose for the incarnation of a son.

And it also means that this world is where we are called to live out our faith and our hope and our love: that we, having seen the child, are called to love this world, this life, not to retreat behind a wall of piety, but to roll up our sleeves and be about the wonderful task of loving one another, those who need us, and to show how deeply God has loved us all by the passion of our own love.

Frederick Buechner writes that when we become too spiritual, too removed from the real world, earthly interruptions will keep us on track.

> "'There should be interruptions in sermons too,' he contends, 'the sound of a baby crying... to remind us of just what this flesh is that the word became.. When the host is being raised before the altar to the tinkling of bells, it is very meek and right if not his bounden duty for the sexton to walk through with vacuum cleaner.'" [A Room Called Remember, "Air for Two Voices," p. 82]

So when the noise of the world interrupts your Christmas solitude, try to remember that the world is what God loves. And when the holiday commercialism and vulgarity and even bongo drummers in a Santa Claus get up, assault your eyes and ears and soul, remember that the Word became flesh.

And when the news of a world where children are hungry, and poor people are ingnored, forces its way into your consciousness, please remember - the Word became flesh.

And when your relationships are a nagging, demanding, worrisom burden from which you would like to be delivered, please remember, the Word became flesh.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God."

And the Word God spoke to the human race, sounds like this:

I am who I am.

I am the essence of all being.

I am the one who creates, who gives you life.

I will be the one who provides what you need for the journey, courage and strength.

I will be your father when you need a love to come down the road to welcome you home.

I will be your mother when you need a nurturing and strong compassion.

I will be your brother and sister when you need someone to stand beside you.

And I will be your lover and friend when you need to be valued and wanted.

I will set you free from whatever holds you captive.

I am not an object you can admire and adore.

I will not be a statue or an icon.

I will not be your favorite name.

I am not hidden in the recesses of time and space.

I am who I am.

I am the Thou with whom you ultimately have to do.

I am the one who comes among you in this infant - this man - this life.

"In the beginning was the Word" and the Word God spoke sounded like this...

I love you.

I am Emmanuel - which means, God with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.